

US sanctions bill against Russia set for passage with bipartisan support

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The Republican-controlled House of Representatives is set to vote Tuesday on legislation that would impose new sanctions on Russia, North Korea and Iran and deny President Trump the usual executive authority to waive sanctions on Russia.

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy scheduled the vote after Democratic and Republican congressional leaders reached agreement on the legislation in weekend talks, reconciling conflicting versions of sanctions bills passed separately by the House and Senate. The original House version did not include provisions directed against Russia. The Senate bill, which incorporated the anti-Russia provisions, was approved last month by a vote of 98 to 2.

Both Democrats and Republicans said they could easily marshal the two-thirds vote necessary to override a potential presidential veto in the Senate. The House would likewise have to vote by more than two-thirds to overturn a White House veto, but in that chamber as well it appears that a veto override would carry.

The principal issue in the talks is not the economic penalties to be levied on the three countries, which are targeted for aggression and ultimately for regime-change by US imperialism. Both parties agree on the “right” of Washington to impose penalties on governments toward which it is hostile.

They were divided on how far to go in limiting Trump’s power to lift sanctions on Russia, given the ongoing campaign by the Democratic Party and the military-intelligence apparatus, backed by the media, attacking Trump as the beneficiary of alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

Economic sanctions have become a major weapon in US foreign policy, but most sanctions laws include a clause allowing the US president to waive some or all of the penalties imposed on other countries. This allows the State Department to negotiate with targeted countries,

offering such waivers as an inducement. It also allows the White House to step in if rivals of US-based corporations gain an advantage by making their own deals.

Speaking on Fox News Sunday, one Senate Republican leader, John Thune of South Dakota, said, “In the end, the administration will come to the conclusion that an overwhelming majority of Congress has, and that is that we need to sanction Russia for their meddling in the US election.” He added that the bill “will pass probably overwhelmingly again in the Senate and with a veto-proof majority.”

Besides opposition from the White House—largely behind closed doors—there has been public criticism by the European Union of at least one provision in the sanctions bill, which bars companies from doing deals with Russian partners where the Russian company owns more than a one-third interest in the venture. This could potentially threaten the Nord Stream II pipeline between Russia and Germany, financed by several Western companies but owned by Russia’s Gazprom.

What remains unclear after the bipartisan agreement over the weekend is the exact language that will permit the House minority (presently the Democrats) to introduce legislation to block a presidential decision to lift sanctions on Russia, even if the majority leadership is opposed to such an action.

Whatever the exact language, the deal already indicates a significant erosion of support for the Trump White House among both Senate and House Republicans, under the impact of the nonstop campaign over alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections and multiple investigations into possible collusion by the Trump election team.

While the White House has dropped any public opposition to the bill, this is mainly because the effort is seen as futile, not because Trump agrees with legislation that amounts to a slap in the face to his administration.

Announcing the bipartisan deal on Twitter, House Majority Leader McCarthy declared, “Those who threaten America and our interests should take notice--your actions have consequences.”

In arbitrarily linking Russia to Iran and North Korea in the same sanctions bill, the Democrats and Republicans in Congress revive memories of one of the most notorious declarations of President George W. Bush, who in a similar fashion linked Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an “axis of evil” before eventually ordering the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The legislation takes as its point of departure the claim that Russia, Iran and North Korea all represent threats to US national security. This is the pretext used today to justify economic sanctions, but it could be invoked tomorrow as the justification for military operations.

The congressional deal came the same weekend as the Aspen Institute conference on US national security at which former CIA Director John Brennan and former Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper denounced Trump for his supposed softness towards Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

Appearing at the same conference, Trump’s own appointees, CIA Director Mike Pompeo and DNI Dan Coats, said they agreed with the series of findings issued by the intelligence agencies that Russia had intervened in the US elections by hacking into Democratic Party servers and spreading anti-Clinton material on the Internet, in order to help Trump win the election.

Top White House aides are under increasing pressure from the congressional and Justice Department investigations into claims—so far unsupported by evidence—that there was collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia during the 2016 election. Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, now a principal adviser in the White House, was interviewed for more than two hours Monday by Senate Intelligence Committee staff members.



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